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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine whether students in a graduate level class that focused on a school restructuring model were able to understand and practice its philosophy. The course focused on innovative school changes and teaching practices used in the Accelerated Schools Project (ASP). The course syllabus required students to examine the philosophy and values of accelerated schools, practice the steps involved in implementing the model's three central principles, evaluate the components of teaching and learning of the ASP, and develop and support a school improvement model based on these practices, including innovative teaching strategies. At the end of the course a survey focused on eight dimensions for measuring change was distributed to the students. These dimensions were insight, knowledge of school change, unity, strengths, empowerment, reflective thinking, dialogue, and inquiry. Results indicated that students understood the philosophy and had experienced attitudinal changes in their personal lives and that the dimensions of unity of purpose, empowerment, and building on strength showed the greatest positive impact on students. However, students did not show confidence in being able to create situations for change at their school site. Therefore, the study concluded that only a partial transformation of students' conceptions of school restructuring occurred. An appendix contains a copy of the survey instrument. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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Toward a Richer Understanding of a School Restructuring Model: Views from Inside a Graduate Level Classroom

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Toward a Richer Understanding of a

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to determine if students participating in a graduate level class that focused on a school restructuring model were able to understand and practice its philosophy. The nucleus of the course was school change. This course was designed for school teachers, administrators, and researchers interested in school change at the district, school, and most importantly, the classroom level. Students investigated the classroom activities related to student achievement in the nationally recognized Accelerated Schools Project.

The restructuring model employed was the Accelerated Schools Project developed by Dr. Henry M. Levin of Stanford University. This model is a comprehensive school improvement program that draws upon instructional approaches developed for and used with gifted children to accelerate the achievement of <u>all</u> students, in particular, students in at-risk situations. Accelerated schools have demonstrated improvements in student test scores, attendance, and motivation, as well as teacher attendance and parental involvement.

The integrated philosophy of accelerated schools centers on three interrelated principles and on the overall goal of creating the types of schools we want for all children. These three interrelated principles that are largely absent from traditional schools--unity of purpose, empowerment coupled with responsibility,

and building on strengths--serve as a vehicle for becoming an accelerated school.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the keys to developing the capacity for school site change impacting the learning environment involves "espousing" and practicing at an "in-use" level. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) purport organizational, social, as well as individual change may come about when people espouse certain values and practice them at an in-use level. Explanations of these concepts are based on two theories of action (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith). One theory, the espoused, refers to what the individual claims he or she believes and what he or she would do in certain circumstances and situations. The second theory, in-use, refers to the actions actually taken in those situations.

For transformational to occur, the principal needs to facilitate and support at an in-use level an educational environment for teachers to engage in dialogue to make free and informed choices on how to build on the strengths of others. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) describe a situation in which there is opportunity for free and informed choices and public testing of ideas as an "unfreezing" process. The school members begin to publicly test their ideas and opinions. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith contend that members of systems can use reflection to: First, unfreeze to begin open and honest communication; second, to reflect on their own lives and world; and third, to begin to learn how to create changes that are "...more congruent with the values

and theories they espouse" (p. 98). Therefore, teachers are empowered to take control in their work place which leads him or her to a particular course of action for transformation. During the progress of this course students had the opportunity to reflect on the values and actions that they use at their school site compared to the values and actions of the Accelerated Schools Project.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCE

This study was conducted at a large university located in southeast Louisiana. The course focused on innovative school changes and teaching practices used in the Accelerated Schools Project. The course syllabus required students to do the following:

1. Examine the philosophy and values of accelerated schools,
2. Practice the steps involved in implementing the three central principles,
3. Evaluate the components of teaching and learning of the Accelerated Schools Project, and
4. Develop and support a school improvement model based on accelerated schools practices, including innovative teaching strategies.

At the end of the course a survey (see Appendix A) containing eight dimensions for measuring change was distributed to the students. These dimensions were insight, knowledge of school change, unity, strengths, empowerment, reflective thinking, dialogue, and inquiry and are described as:

1. Insight refers to redesigning one's role in their working relationships with their peers. As David (1989) notes, restructuring work signals "...a major shift in how people in school systems think about roles and relationships" (p. 29).

2. Knowledge of school change needs to encompass an understanding of the components for restructuring schools. These components involve looking in multiple directions (Murphy, 1991).

3. Unity refers to a striving among parents, teachers, support staff, students, administrators, the district, and the local community toward a common set of goals for the school that becomes the focal point of everyone's efforts (Levin, 1987).

4. Strengths involves sharing and utilizing all of the human resources that students, parents, school staff, districts, and local communities bring to the educational endeavor (Levin, 1989).

5. Empowerment coupled with responsibility includes the ability of all participants in a school community to:

a. make important educational decisions

b. share responsibility for the implementation and outcome of those decisions (Hopfenberg et al., 1993).

6. Reflective thinking encourages school members to publicly test their ideas and opinions as a path to profile learning from each other because the virtues of trust, honesty, and integrity are developed (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Bennis, 1989). According to Schon (1985), through reflection one gets a feeling for a situation which leads him or her to a particular course of action.

7. Dialogue can play an important role as a starting point for organizing a program of education. Dialogue allows educators to look critically at what they are doing and become aware of their situations in order to make changes. Freire (1973) purports that, "It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours" (p. 85).

8. Inquiry is a method for solving the complex problems of a school community thus enabling groups of people to work together to gain a more complete understanding of the challenges they face.

FINDINGS

The findings indicated that there was an understanding of the accelerated schools philosophy. As a result, the understanding led to an attitudinal change in the personal lives of the students. As one student noted, "Unless the restructuring begins bottom-up, involves all groups, and depends on consensus, all members of the community won't feel ownership and pride in the school."

Another student revealed her belief in the basic premise of accelerated schools that all children are envisioned as gifted and talented. As she noted, "This course refocuses my dream and vision as an educator that all children can learn." One student supported the concept that restructuring involves looking for changes in multiple dimensions by stating, "This course has helped me realize that schools have a choice for change. Hopefully, my enthusiasm for the process will be contagious."

The dimensions of unity of purpose, empowerment, and building on strengths showed the greatest positive impact as illustrated by the following statements:.

Unity of Purpose

One student stated that, "Combined with previous courses and the knowledge obtained in this course, restructuring became a daily behavior with me. The first thing I noticed about my relationship with my colleagues was the mentoring conversations. I now listen to what they are saying and the responses [that reflect] shared knowledge and concepts. This is a start because the hall teachers now share ideas and do less gossiping."

Another student noted that, "In my professional life, this principle has helped me to emphasize collaboration. It has particularly benefitted the dynamics that take place during our middle school teaming sessions with regard to scheduling our students and with disciplinary actions." Yet another student reported that, "The unity of purpose confirmed my belief that the whole school community needs to be unified and focused toward the same goals."

Building on strengths.

In the words of one student, "I think this course has made me aware of looking for strengths, rather than weaknesses and building on those strengths. This applies to working with students and faculty members." Another student noted that, "Because of this course, I confer more readily with fellow teachers." Another student stated that, "I realize my own talents and how I could help

my co-workers and how they could share their expertise. This process would probably make the faculty, staff, students, and community bond."

Building on strengths was emphasized when a student responded in these words, "This principle has definitely resulted in an attitudinal change in both [my] personal and professional life. It also applies to adults, as well as children. Everyone has strengths, however, we tend to look at what people have difficulty accomplishing. Now I try to focus on the strengths of those I work and live with."

Empowerment coupled with responsibility.

The principle of empowerment coupled with responsibility was evidenced by several students in the following ways:

1. "This course has shown me how teachers can be empowered."

2. "Now that my actions are critically and cautiously analyzed, the responsibility is all mine and the consequences that follow are accepted fully. If the results are negative, it will hurt but the learning experiences will allow me to change the material to search for the desired results. Empowerment [in] the decision making process allows change and encourages the fight to continue."

3. "This [principle] was the best and hardest for me to accept. I feel I'm more of a manager and releasing and trusting others to do their jobs was a letting go step that I was not comfortable with."

Even though understanding and internalizing the philosophy at a personal level was evident, the results indicated that participants were not secure in creating situations for change at their school site. As one student stated, "I have always been responsible in both personal and professional life. This course has shown me how teachers can be empowered, but nothing has changed at my school."

Another student responded in this way, "While this course has presented information that has increased my awareness of the inquiry process and the benefits that can be derived from such a process, the faculty/colleagues in my school are not yet ready for this process. I don't think they feel comfortable taking the risks involved in this process."

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Implications of this study indicate that it is possible to espouse change within oneself. However, in order for change to occur at an in-use level, opportunities for alterations in roles and responsibilities must be provided for all members of the school community.

As the data noted teachers were able to espouse the principles of unity of purpose, empowerment coupled with responsibility, and building on strengths in their personal lives. The data also confirmed that teachers were able to recognize that these principles were present in their schools to some degree. However, the students acknowledged their limitations in making substantial changes within the school as a whole. Students revealed that

faculty members espoused these principles but in fact were not using them on a daily basis. St. John, Allen-Haynes, Davidson, and Meza (1992) indicate that:

> Based on our experience with observations of and research on the implementation of the accelerated schools process, we have concluded that principles need to be experienced at the "in-use" level, for the accelerated schools process to take hold in a school. P. 64

Therefore, evidence indicates that only a partial transformation of the students' conceptions of school restructuring occurred. The rational for this claim is based on the following:

1. The espoused beliefs in the three guiding principles of accelerated schools by students evolved during the progress of the course.

2. The students had reservations about their ability to actually influence change at an "in-use" level in their schools. Based on students' observations of their own faculties, change is grounded in the framework of everyone becoming involved in the restructuring movement. The students' perceptions limited their access to training faculty members on the three principles. Therefore, their perceptions inhibited their willingness and ability to become catalysts for change. Griffith (1992) contends that the perceptions of school members constructs the way schooling is shaped.

3. As a result, the students apparently did not make an all out effort to initiate changes with the faculty members. Fullan (1994) argues that the entire school community's way of thinking and acting needs to change in order for transformation to occur.

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Appendix A

Each answer has two parts. First, circle the correct answer. Next, please site at least one example that reinforces your response to the question. Your description of the example/s is not limited to the provided space. Use additional pages to elaborate your answer/s.

1. This course has made a difference in the manner I think and act at my school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

2. My current knowledge of the Accelerated Schools Project has given me new insight on how to begin the restructuring process at my own school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. The accelerated schools process appears to be a restructuring process that is more effective than others of which I have knowledge.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

4. Understanding the principle of unity of purpose has resulted in an attitudinal change in my personal life and/or my professional life.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. Understanding the principle of building on strengths has resulted in an attitudinal change in my personal life and/or my professional life.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

6. Understanding the principle of empowerment coupled with responsibility has resulted in an attitudinal change in my personal life and/or my professional life.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

7. The course activities focusing on the accelerated schools process have encouraged me to use reflective thinking with classmates and colleagues at my school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

8. Because of this course, I created situations at my school for open and honest dialogue.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

9. Due to the information presented in this course, I created situations for school inquiry in order for colleagues to test this beliefs.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

10. Due to the information presented in this course, I created situations in which there were win/win (both parties benefit from the behavior of dialogue) opportunities for myself and my colleagues.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree